

“Of Mountains and Lakes”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 22, 2018

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalms 23

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 6:45-56

Even though our group of twelve completed the ten-hour drive back from North Carolina yesterday, with our bodies arriving safely home; a part of my mind and spirit lingers amid the majestic mountains and placid lakes of Montreat. Having now attended six youth conferences over the years, it has grown to become a favored and familiar place of respite and retreat. It is, as many have described it before me, a “thin place” where the distance between heaven and earth seems to narrow almost to nothing.

Next week, our youth and adult participants are going to share with you a taste of what they experienced at Montreat, so I am not going to recount this morning the content of the conference – things like the preaching, teaching, music, recreation and small group experiences. I want to talk today instead about the contrast, balance and rhythms of work and rest, earth and spirit, mountain and lake.

We pick up the story of Jesus’ ministry in Mark this morning immediately following the story of the Feeding of Five Thousand in a deserted place on the Galilean hillside. The crowds of people that were fed had followed and found Jesus and his disciples as they had tried to retreat and rest. Now, Jesus tries again to escape from the crowds, going back down to the lakeside to board a boat to the other side. He sent his disciples ahead and went by himself back up the mountain to pray.

What happens next, of course, is one of the great mysteries of the New Testament. As the disciples are struggling to row across the windy sea, they see Jesus approaching them, walking on the water. Thinking they are seeing a ghost, the disciples are terrified until Jesus says, “do not be afraid.” The winds die down and the waves calm as Jesus joins them in the boat to sail on to the other side.

But again, they are not able to escape the crowds who immediately recognize Jesus and begin to bring to him the sick. Just as he had previously with the hungry people on the hillside, Jesus has compassion on those who are ill on the lakeshore, then in the nearby villages.

It may seem that the lesson here is that there is no rest for the weary. While Jesus invites his disciples to get away, they don’t get the chance as they are asked to respond to the needs of the crowds surrounding them. Their plans for respite are temporarily put on hold as Jesus goes about feeding and curing, teaching and healing all who are in need.

And just as this was Jesus' call upon his disciples, the same call comes to us as well – we are to be people who have compassion and try to address the hungers and needs of the people around us, whether in our congregation or in our communities.

The Greek word for compassion has its root in a word that means “guts” as in “feeling it in your guts.” We all know this feeling – where our reaction to something churns in the pit of our stomach. That's the visceral feeling of compassion.¹

Jesus has compassion because – as he describes it earlier in chapter 6 – the people are like sheep without a shepherd. In other words, they are lost, lacking guidance, in need of care and protection, pasture and nurture. For Jesus, compassion is not just a feeling in his gut, but something that sets him – and his followers – into motion for the sake of others.

But as much as Jesus knew how lost the crowd felt, he also knows about the fear and fragility that his disciples sometimes feel. He knows that those who have compassion for and tend to others also need to know Jesus has compassion for and tends to them. How do Christ's disciples feel safe, loved and nurtured? Sometimes, those people who are the most compassionate don't allow themselves to be recipients of care and compassion. And so, with so many needs around us, we might at times experience “compassion fatigue,” not knowing when and how to stop.

And so, Jesus comes to us at those times when we feel like we are rowing against the current and offers to sit in the boat with us and silence the winds. God offers opportunities for respite and renewal, and presents this example of taking the time to go up the mountain to pray.

One of our Montreat traditions is the sunrise hike up Lookout Mountain. This week, we planned it for Wednesday morning, and it required waking up at 5:30 a.m. to make the strenuous uphill climb to reach the peak on the hillside, starting out our ascent in total darkness to be at the optimal vantage point peak when the sun began to peek across the ridge to the east.

Tuesday had been a full day at Youth Conference with our back-home meeting ending about 11 p.m. At its close, I asked for a show of hands of who was interested in waking early for the climb, half-hoping – since I had already done the morning climb several times before, and having gone up with the whole group that same afternoon – that everyone would choose instead to sleep in. And some of them made that choice, but a few – three others to be precise – decided that they wanted to make the sunrise ascent. And so, I agreed to accompany them; and I am so glad that I did. We ended up being the

¹ Karoline Lewis, “The Dew of Compassion”

first group to the summit, when the skies were just starting to get their hues of pink and red. As we sat in the quiet, watching the clouds slowly roll over the mountains, a few other groups joined us atop Lookout Mountain to see the sun finally rise up and over the ridge: a vivid reminder of God's grandeur and presence in creation and in our midst.

Sometimes, the lakes upon which we sail along are placid, but often the waters which we navigate are choppy and require great effort. Sometimes, in our work on behalf of others, we get tired and even afraid. And so, God joins us to calm to waters or, just as importantly, calls us up to the mountains to enter into the divine presence and experience a "thin place" between heaven and earth. This can happen when we step into a different physical space, but also when we enter into a place and posture of prayer; seeking to connect with the God who made us, loves us unconditionally and has compassion on us.

Here, in Mark, chapter 6, Jesus is nearing the zenith of his popularity as the large crowds are constantly following him seeking to be fed and healed. But, soon enough, Jesus will turn his face toward the cross and begin to talk more and more about sacrifice and of losing one's life in order to gain it. No sooner does that happen and the very crowds that thronged around Jesus get thinner and thinner until finally even the disciples fall away one by one to the point that in the end Jesus dies alone.²

Too often, we forget the divine truth that is captured by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. "When Christ calls a man to follow him," Bonhoeffer wrote, "he bids that man to come and die." We sacrifice our sense of self-sufficiency and self-preservation. We don't stop using the personal pronouns "I" and "me," but we place our sense of self in the context of who we are in relationship to Jesus.

In our often too cozy middle-class American lives, it can be easy to pass the buck on compassion. Whether we are looking to the needs of our own family, or our seemingly self-sufficient neighbors, or the wider community, it's tempting to tell ourselves that there is nothing urgent at stake: everything can wait. Jesus was unapologetic about the need to experience rest and solitude. He saw no shame in retreating when he and his disciples needed a break.

On the other hand, Jesus never allowed his weariness to overwhelm his compassion. He realized that the people coming to him were, indeed, like sheep without a shepherd and that whether it was physical hunger or illness or emotional fear and fatigue, his personal needs and plans were not ultimately more important than the needs of others. Instead, he always lived his life in the midst of community – with the disciples he knew and the strangers he encountered – and his sense of well-being was not independent from that of others.

² Scott Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

Is there a lesson to be learned here? Are we to strive for balance in life; to recognize weariness when we feel it and take breaks when we need them? In the long term, yes; when their first attempt at prayer and retreat was interrupted, Jesus did not give up on that pursuit, but put it on pause and went back to try it again later. And so, while a balance between the demands of work and the desire for respite stands as the ideal, it won't always be available in the short-term. Sometimes, we will have to err on the side of sacrifice – yielding something of our life for the sake of others – and bend out of balance.³

If that happens, today's Gospel story seems to teach us, then we should bend in the direction of compassion. And then, when the opportunity presents itself – as it did for me to climb up the mountain in darkness in order to experience the breaking of dawn on the mountaintop – we should take it; as Jesus seemed to do. For even in the midst of the push and pull of daily life, Jesus is attentive to the practice of his spiritual disciplines and invites those who are in ministry with him to stop for reflection and prayer.

There is much to do *immediately* and, at times, even Jesus couldn't stop. He was driven by the gut feeling of compassion. But, Jesus also knew that he and his disciples needed pause. Nobody can keep running and doing with stopping sometimes for rest and renewal.⁴

Our twin tasks are to be attentive to all that is crying for our attention and demanding our care; as well as to stop to pray and discern how the Spirit of God is nurturing and feeding us, and therefore where and how we are called to work. In the long run, one without the other will leave us not just out of balance, but out of tune with the way that God has created us and Jesus has taught us to live our lives. AMEN.

³ Debie Thomas, "Come Away with Me"

⁴ Claudio Carvalhaes from *WorkingPreacher.com*